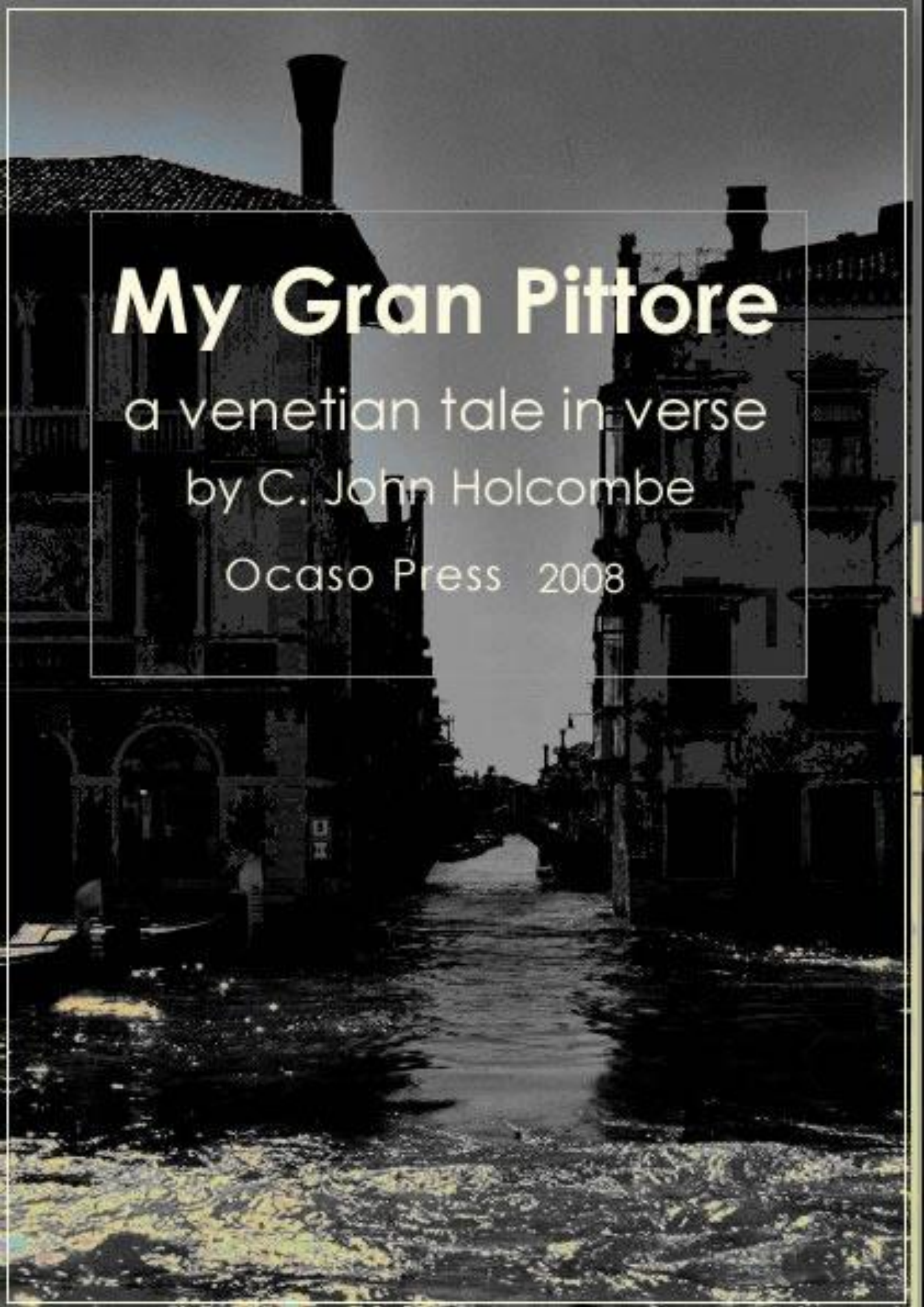

My Gran Pittore

a venetian tale in verse

by C. John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008

My Gran Pittore

by

Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008

My Gran Pittore

by

Colin John Holcombe

Text and typesetting by Colin John Holcombe.

Published by Ocaso Press Ltda.

Santiago, Chile.

Last Revised: November 2017

Reformatted: December 2024

My Gran Pittore

Part One

I leave the gate and take a path that leads
through flowering marjoram and open vines.
Above are oranges and, just as then,
the periwinkles sparkle in the grass.

It seems but yesterday the years I passed
in subrogation to our sovereign Venice,
but now a summer's breath is in the wind,
and all around there seems a happiness
that clothes these festivals of countryside,
and makes our littorals of floating lights,
the fret and hubbub of our carnivals,
but working transcripts of a dream, with no
more matter to them than the tranquil clouds
have business with us but to trail on slowly,
remote and ever-moving and to me
most beautiful and of our Saviour's light:
His meek, perpetual majesty as shown
in wondrous spectacles upon the earth

I press on upwards as the path grows steeper
a free man walking in his own good time

a man at peace with God who is his conscience,
and one moreover kindly, with a wit
well known to Doge as to the quayside merchant,
a twinkling eye and ready deference
that brings commission from the Church or State.

I pause to get my breath, but looking up
can see the tops of cupolas through trees,
and over them that yellow, heavy dome
above the chapel where my work would hang:
a shout of outside laughter where the light is dim,
evoked with incense and with candle smoke,
with sins repented of, where God comes back
to figure in our soul- and self-perceivings —
as in those paintings that we see again
with long-forgotten passages that show
in our long trailings after truth we found
one day a resurrection of the light.

As so it seemed then, though the path was steeper.

A nun is waiting for me. Quietly
we go down corridors and into rooms
where all is ordered and the air is still.
I pass by apparitions bent at tasks,
intent on sewing, on the stitch and patch
of cassocks threadbare at the knees. One lifts
a head, acknowledges my greeting, sadly
smiles. The figures here were famous beauties,
hung with wealth and title, families
whose names make riot down the packed canals,
receive in palaces of gilded pomp,
where men in livery, good honest men,
must go the instant on some passing whim.

She'll be, the Abbess, with me presently.
I sit at first, but then get up and pace
between the windows and rush-backed chairs,
across a room that's comfortless: a small
brass crucifix beside an altar cloth.

How different is the world beyond. The window
looks down to levels where my workshop lies.
The light still flares there but the prospect darkens
and what was glittering is laid aside.
The everyday returns and I can see
both shining interludes and what are now
but villages with churches, congregations
that bow to images and rough-hewn saints.

A rustle: she is here: I make my reverence.

'A new face for you, signor Veronese.
Please be seated. You must excuse my calling
one so well known, who has many duties.'

The workshop thrives. I have the leisure now
to see and travel, and in choosing hope
that what we undertake will please our Lord.

'My predecessor will have missed that quiet
appropriateness she often spoke of: words
that show a wise and courtly deference
but please both honest worker and the heart.'

She's gone, the Sister Agnes? I had not heard.

'This March. We buried her before the springtime's
scent of oranges and singing birds.
A long, harsh time it was. Our sister lingered

much in her prayers but watching, we could see,
the slow light drag itself on floors, the sun
pick out more solidly these heavy walls,
the trees and vines show promise with their buds
of summer's leafiness she would not see.'

To hear that I am sorry and would repent
of any matters that involve my name.

'Things to be cleared up in the contract here:
both parties put their hand to it but still
it lies these ten years later, unfulfilled.'

It does.

'No drawings given us?'

None.

'And none intended? Ever? Voided contract?'

There were some stipulations, features which
in a mind of giving or of recollection
I gave assent to, stupidly, which even
now I think on, and regret, and daily. . .

'You need not speak in riddles, master painter.
The donna Antonia has spelt the matter
out and wants no redress from the past.'

Well then.

'You could not bear to draw that face?'

I tried.

'Or did not want to, Veronese,
being a man of substance, a reputation
not assisted by such memories?'

No doubt, most Reverend Mother, but in truth
the hundred faces in my canvasses
have come from high life and the low.

I need
not say to one who offers grace and hope,
a sanctuary to all who hear His gospel,
and more, will take His simple words to heart,
how variously those pictures were assembled —
from artisans long out of work, poor men
glad for a glittering soldo to stand for hours,
from drabs and courtesans, rich merchant wives,
the most respectable, good burger folk,
the hard of heart and merry under God.

'She does not linger in your memory?'

Would that she did, good Reverend Mother. Sometimes
I think all Venice is interred with bones.

'You think too much of limepits and encroaching
fires, my son. She is with others, sent
from this distracted world of grief and pain
to where God's mercy is and all have peace.'

You never knew how kind she was, or what
perfection stood within those forthright features.

'God has His purposes as One who moves
beyond the firmament that makes our thought.'

She had more care than has the wandering friar
attached to paternosters and his books.
The smallest frightened creature on God's earth
drew out her sighs and pity. I have seen
her nurse a tabby cat, a brindled stray
with sores and tattered ears and wariness
that kept to inner doorways or to dark
cloth underspaces of the vendors stalls,
with such a patience and a kindliness
that it would wanton after stranger's steps.

'My son, I cannot give you absolution,
but on this matter stay as simple folk
who ask for order and for straight accounts
in sums endowed to us that your commission
be wrought in handiwork or handed back.'

With all regret, that must be so. I ask
pardon on my dilatoriness and any
want of candour, but that path is best.

'Is it, my son? The lady Schiavoni,
the donna Antonia whom you knew so well,
has asked for audience, that you say
in person how your thoughts incline.'

She's here,
the donna Antonia, now?

'Has been
these many years, in hope to make her peace
for all that she has done, or has not done.
Speak with her.'

What can words effect
in me that was denied before? Respects
and courtesies to one who graced her station.

'You do not know with what experience
I came into this sanctuary of peace.
I gave my word, Signore, to our sister,
that you would see her, for the time that's past.'

Part Two

They say she's changed, is not that flare
of jewels and fiery nature that had made
all Venice follow at respectful distance,
and that great body in its open clothes
forgoes the armed retainers of its stride.

Me she hardly deigned to notice, not
the once among those scarlet personages
who walked attending on the Doge's chair.

Who was that? I asked in confidence,
awaiting audience. My neighbour smiled.
*'The large, imperious one with golden hair?
She, Caliari, is the Schiavoni,
and not for us.'*

Please bid her talk to me.

'*You, Caliari, a painter, mason's son
where she's a courtesan of peerless rank
who trails a emperor's ransom in her clothes.'*

*I want a sitting. On whatever terms
she cares to name will be commission
to give her ever afterwards a name.*

'No,' he said the two weeks later. *'No.
Of course I told her that your portraits grace
the best of palaces, the Doge's rooms,
that all admire your well-wrought sumptuousness
of colour, candour and the breath of day.*

At which she only laughed. Good friend, you'll not
beguile the Schiavoni with your art.'

That time will change, I thought, and vowed
it like an adolescent, new arrival,
who does not know what yawning distances
mark off the mountain peaks when seen from far.

I tried at first to call: she was not home.
I hung about the streets with words prepared
to say, *I am the painter from Verona.*

'Go by,' she said.

Who wishes to record
your beauty that the ages hence will feel
how rich was Venice in that woman's day.

She swore. *'Caliari, yes, I know your name.*
Do not insult me with such hackneyed words.
Be gone, my little painter, dog no heels
or these attendants will undo your person.
No, put him down,' she said, and I was left
shaking with anger as she sauntered off.

And yet I'd noted how that body moved,
unyielding heaviness in folded arms,
and distant fury under gilded lids.
Immediately, in bitterness, I set
my chalk to paper. Feverishly for hours
I worked, bewildering our Benedetto.

'What of commissions? Brother, speak to me!
First was idleness for weeks, and now
this headlong industry. Good man, take pause.'

Aghast, he watched me change the faces, bring
them round to that still ringing in my head.

'Good brother, *by the saints in Heaven, you'll get us*
dropped from every Guild or Council. Be done,'
he said, *'or find some other face to paint.'*

How many renderings of a onetime beauty
were fixed in that small portrait I sent off
and waited, sent a message, waited more
as weeks turned months and came there not a word.

From distances I saw the Schiavoni
moving as great vessels do, with grace
and force so menacing I sought to use
her features for my crowed city scenes.
That, for six long years, was all my dealing
with the donna Antonia Schiavoni —
but things imagined and more empty longings
that caused me mischief and a lighter purse.

Our meeting when it came was unexpected.
I was playing of an evening at a tavern,
a solo part with lute, and not demanding,
but still I turned that heartache into song,
when from the balcony there came a voice
I did not know, and fragrant, dark and not
unmusical, which drew all faces up.
She laughed and threw a golden ducat down
and said, as we made bows,

'Come to evenings
on the Monticegno, all of you.'

We're not musicians, lady, only friends.

'Nor I a singer either.' Then she laughed
with such a drop of voice that all stood still
and looked at me again. *'Goodnight my friends.'*

What can I say but she was gracious, kindly
even, treating us with deference?
And as we played, she sang and joined
as will a lady in the kitchen dress with herbs
the venison her maids have sweated for.
But sometimes of an evening it would seem,
this company of gallants, mistresses,
and we plain artisans were of one breath
that rang together as the crystal spheres,
for all that later she would smile and tease.

'Now won't
you stay, my painter friend, and sing awhile?'

But I, not now the raw provincial, smiled,
and feigned a mute indifference to her words.

'My friends,' she said one evening as we went,
'I'll bid you leave me signor Veronese.'
That was my name by then, but hardly had
she used it. She smiled and took me by the arm
impetuously, and when alone with me,
said:

'You are not kind. What must I do?
keep hours of darkness, dress in winding sheets,
forgo all riotous company and seek
to pass my days in sadness like a saint?'

My donna Antonia, I made an offer,
gave all I had in it, but was rebuffed.

'In what?' she said. *'That painting? You were a fool*
those days, which I forgave, and burnt the thing.

She stared awhile, then swore, and struck me hard.

'Must I, the Schiavoni, sue, for what
is daily pressed on me by Doge's sons?
Listen, we are not different, you and I.
We both serve Venice and our social betters,
as did my mother, and her mother too.
And both, now note me, master painter, spoiled
the future wanting as must other folk
a child, a husband and a home at last.

Why look surprised? Your mind is subtle, quick
to take in circumstance and hold its peace.'

What can I say to you, my lady? I am
beholden to your kindness and your person
for hours of happiness, for having stayed
a little in the prospects of your gifts.

'I speak too plainly, do I? Caliari,
I know your dispositions: you would not paint
a woman's wantonness and love of clothes,
if not enraptured by that selfsame music.
So take me fully, with your mind and heart,
or never draw me henceforth to your thoughts.'

Part Three

No words were needed. Fervently I took
the hand, and in the afterwards was made
to delve as one who's lost his senses, feel
more depths of wanting that a man can hold.
Her need was mine and with an openness
I could not think were possible in one
so calculating in her step and dress.

I kept the matter close to mind and then
applied myself once more to ink and paint.

Those things I painted — in the liquid strokes
that lingered in an eyelid or a streak
of greenish ochre in the golden hair
there wound in braids and touched with pearls, in bloom
of healthy skin that brought in breast and ear —
were what I'd sensed or run my fingers through
on long-remembered afternoons, the sun-
light soaking into faded tapestries
or warming shuttering that closed the walls
and rose as battlement around that body,
which was not fully mine, as Venice knew
and smiled indulgently, as did her suitors
attending business or the Council meetings.

It was no more than that, for I am one
who sees his miracles in daily things:
The breath of sunlight in the morning haze,
the boats that bob and ply upon the far lagoon,
to me appeared a token of the Lord

admonishing in every word and act —
who made continually the ducats ring:

Your studio would do this? So much obliged.
Your last astonished us and therefore we
will meet your fees, in total, as agreed.

I was no madman with unlicensed dreams
but lived, when young, with miracles, and lodged
their schooling in my mind. When daylight bloomed,
however late, dilatory, monastic even
on my rough father's walls, I'd rise and sketch
the shape of gesture on the smoother stone:
the figures sumptuous as they stood, life-proud,
imperiously contained within their forms.

God's hand was in that painting, and I found
through puppetry and seeming make-believe
afresh new images that made them true,
and that hard conscience of my father gave
me grace to witness sorrow in his place.

To bless one lost in rages, more in drink,
a man turned on himself who, though he saw
the springtime fragrant in the earth, could feel
the angels passing in the wind, could hear
the chattering of leaves, the voice of rivers,
could only with his clumsy hands attempt
to carve crude images in wayside shrines.

Part Four

So now there comes to me the Schiavoni,
and all my years are needed not to show
how changed she looks, where that high sweeping air
is sunk to petulance and bloated skin,
though eyes still blaze at me.

How hard the stone
must be, how comfortless the cold steps down
to corridors and bare refectory tables.

'I am accustomed to confining walls,
to silences that reach to echoing steps,
where daylight at the window bars and waits
for evening's fading and the flight of bats.

I give this withered hand your lips have kissed
a thousand times in rapture, now beset
by folds, loose veins and liver-spots.'

My lady.

'I am not your lady but a Magdalena,
a sister of reputation fallen on white charity,
who stoops her body down by altar steps
and calls most fervently that God's high grace
will give her ending in a contrite heart.'

May God so grant it with His abundant blessings
that those who seek Him here may have their rest.

'Amen to that. I see you have not lost
your gift for courtesy and fashioned phrase.'

I come at your request, against my own
good judgement, as the Reverend Mother urged.

'Commission, Caliari, where is that?'

I think much lost upon the way.

'Ten years
and nothing? Not a sketch? You're surely one
to send for sorrow when you are so slow.'

So many orders came, at times from those
abroad with embassies we can't refuse.

'That all Venice knows, those highnesses
who want for allegories their painted women.
Who sat for those gross trumperies?'

None.
I've seen all women as our Saviour made them,
from bold ten soldi sluts who sit astride
and flaunt, or would do, gratis, what they have
to merchant wives with breeding who would hold
a pose for ever if good Venice saw them,
and true celebrities as you were then,
whose dress had jewels, of which just one
had paid my staff and paint bill for a month.

'Always the same, Caliari: ever
the small man totting up the risk and cost.'

God has shown me many kindnesses
against the odds, in one who came from modest
circumstances, indeed impoverished.

'Who left that path, and quietly climbing, turned
as ever to prevailing winds.'

Who shows
his handiwork but as his betters pay?

'Why should you show this vale of tears with drench
of colour when it is a vain illusion?'

I came, my Lady, to enquire your health,
ask pardon of offences, make my peace.

'Too late, my friend. Fulfil the contract.'

That now,
is neither possible nor for the best.

If I have gathered in commissions, won
a living and some honour, gained the trust
of Doge and merchant, I have much to think
on nonetheless, and so I tell Carletto,
son and workman in my place.

'Yes,
I've seen those ill-constructed things. What can
you teach of dancing with such awkward steps?'

It's true I paint the evening shadows which
have truth in outline, and were always there.
My time is fining out, and things around
now look at me reproachfully.

For months
your image hung against my thought, pressed up
against me, filled my waking and my sleep.

What liberties I took with it, extending
myself imagined into every part:
a heaven of having and of rough delighting,
till after, when the dawn light found me spent
and comfortless, what fasts and promises
and penance I'd have to make, confessions
that holy fathers even tired of me.

I blush to tell you even sombre eyes,
the hint of green, the silvery greys, all
I paint and am most famous for, began
in your rejection, mocking laugh, a mouth
that spat at me, a muscled form I sensed
had power to hold me and invade the heart.

'Fine words, my Veronese, and as cheap
as things you painted in the Levi's feast.'

I have seen you come as summer to a room
and draw the fragrance out of winter's leaves
in slow surrender.

I have seen see you dance
with women, laughing, lead them on to snatch
at men they should not notice, turn and look
a wild Bacchante with their passions flushed.

Who can deal with that but gentlemen
who keep themselves in bearing, where their name
can look but idly on a crowd, and know
whatever they may do, or do not do,
their prospects answer for. For me, I am
and should be conscious of a modest place.

'You had my waking and my company
far more than others who had flung apartments,
jewels and ducat nights on what was passing.
You I entertained in my long hours
of grace and recollection, heartfelt ease
before we slip on bodices and silken
underclothes and such extravagances
as parties shall demand: in these I was
in service to you and much more myself.'

For me as well they were enchanted hours,
my dear Antonia, and I still see
that shower of benefice as though the sun
had thrown its mintage into shuttered bars.

'*You spurned me, Caliari. That long year*
we lived together as the city starved,
I sold my jewels, gave up apartments, dressed
but modestly, becomingly, the while
we both by gifts survived: I bore your child,
and asked for nothing but a recognition.

That was all, my Caliari, simply
name. I asked for that and you refused.
The Schiavoni, with her wealthy patrons,
beset by titled gentlemen, must beg
to court the daylight in some finer cloth.'

I offered wet-nurse, clothes and crib, and never
once suggested that dark foundling's grate.
I would support it, with a name in time
for mother's schooling or a workshop place.

'But not God's blessing, true — my Caliari?
You cast me off, an outworn shoe, not one

you had now further use of, being minded
to find another of more virgin shape.'

And I've been punished too, whose only thought
was Anna's virtue and her honest name.
I knew too well what Venice breeds, what tempting
wagers would be laid that she would fall,
the one most perfect, having most to lose,
undo the innocence and mother's heart.

'Whose daughter do we talk of? I it was
who gave her schooling, taught her music, ensured
a dozen gentlemen would pay their court.'

Perhaps I said that on my mission year,
the one I went to Rome with Gerolama
Grimani and notables of Venice,
and was distracted, knowing how you'd drill
the child and likely would despatch her fast,
before objections found their time to speak.

Signor Veronese, come and talk
to us of your commissions, how you'd paint
this Rome of palaces and great St. Peter's,
colonnades of marble, flights of stairs,
great personages on business with the Holy
Father, the first of capitals in this new world.

What did I say? I cannot remember: things
polite and deferential. Come, come, said one:
don't play the courtier here; you're now with friends.
Speak plainly to us. Then in truth I miss
the bustle and the personage of others
that pack our thoroughfares and mooring steps,
the furriers from Moscovy, Smyrna

merchants, Asiatics with their robes,
the blackamores, who bear the carriage, walk
with rods of ivory and heavy gold.
These I miss for all that Rome confounds
us with its march of long events.

I lied.

Before me stretched a realm more fabulous
than ever Titian's was or could be now.
What was one poor daughter to those yards
of canvases ablaze in papal chambers?
Pride, pride as ever in my gifts,
the praise of courtiers and of worthy men:
these took me from my path; I scorned the most
that God in His great mercy gave to me.

'That I've always known, my friend, and as
for peace, and my forgiving, that will come
with God's own ordinances. Here I take
my leave: you'll hear no further from me now,
nor know reproaches afterwards. I have
a last request: you meet one other so.'

Part Five

How curiously our hopes press on and leave
our fuller selves unhatched, and all those hopes
dissolved in recollections, which in time
fill out with poignant anguish and the hurt
in something still unread.

In our child's case —
Anna Matilda she was named — I went
then back and forth and sent her mother notes.

Long days I sat in silence, Benedetto
looking on. The honest workman that
he is could doubtless have divined the matter
but spoke of new commissions, days ahead,
the pigments now on order: studio talk.

Again I went and didn't, helplessly
I wandered round the streets, an adolescent
still at heart.

It was a girl, they said,
a pleasing-featured, forward little girl.
Across the months and years, there came a sense
of someone distant who was also mine.

At last I saw the Schiavoni child,
if all too briefly: such a pretty girl:
her mother's nose and eyes were most distinct,
but head and attitude there spoke of mine.
I was consumed by thoughts of tenderness
and then of biting grief. I made at times

to see my one-time mistress. She refused.
I stopped her sometimes on the streets, and once
beneath the campanile. She went on by.

Yet on the child I marvelled more and found
God's handiwork's was with me from that day.

The trailing vesper bell that calls to prayer
us and our thoughts, has reveries no less
than these. I then reformed, was less at bawdy
houses, more at work, made such amends
commissions flooded in, from church and priory
in Venice and from far Verona even
where I first painted and was therefore feted:
a lad returning to his native haunt.

I met again my master Antonio
Badile who put me up and had his daughter
the young Elena wait at table where
I saw the small lithe body, neat and bony,
no grace about it but complete and comely,
round eyes and placid, smiling, questioning
and following each step I took. *'She wants
a husband*,' said her father. *'You could do worse.
She'll wait upon you, run the workshop,
bear your children and be capable.
Think on it, Caliari*.' I scarcely did
but said as was required, how at my age
the good Elena could well look beyond,
how many candidates were thereabouts.

He laughed. *'She's set on you*.'

*She cannot know
me or my life.*

'Caliari, think
of your good father gone these fourteen years
and thankfully to earth. He wanted only
ministrations and a house in order,
as your poor mother managed till she died.'

And so we married. A short and country service:
Elena pretty, I most dignified.
We stepped out, smiling to the April sun
and settled life: and all went from that day
onward as by rote. Affectionate,
by turns attentive, I became in time
a father who would play with Gabriele
and then Carletto, happily, though toiling
at San Sebastiano, day and night.

At last there came Vitoria, a thing
most delicately fashioned, with a smile
so happy and ingenuous I might
have thought her recompense for someone else.
But then I met my Anna with her mother,
a thing of radiance and perfect grace.

Elena knew? Most probably, and half
of Venice, like as not: I was
of course admonished, and continually
at pains to put her image out of mind.
And yet I found her one day at the church.
'*Signor Pittore'* is what she said.

'Signore,
how is it that you paint but empty air?
How are the figures vibrant, yet in truth
but tiny dabs of paint?'

A trick, my lady.

She smiled and almost curtsied and I caught
my paintbrush quivering as she said,

'My name
is Anna Schiavoni, which my mother says
you know.'

I do, and bid you to please
excuse this artifice of handiwork.

'You are, Signore, much too modest. All Venice
knows you as the first of painters. Please
to paint some artifice for me.'

What could
a lady want that has so much?'

'My mother's face.'

Ah no, my little lady, that is yours
by right: you see it plainly every day.

'She said you would refuse. What then?'

What then?
My little lady, if you'd hold yourself
here a moment longer — this we have.
I showed it her, a rapid sketch on paper
that would not last, but still a speaking likeness
of that most gentle but still earnest face.

So was my Anna: day by day she came
more willingly — what could I do? — to watch
me painting, tell me tales of friends and outings,

what mother said of her, what schoolmates planned
for Michelmass or Whitsuntide. I smiled
but took on seriousness when next she said:

'Why am I talking now, signor Pittore?
Why are you listening to the empty chatter
as though this child were yours, as though your heart
wove in the incidents that make her life?'

Part Six

Those words are such to break a father's heart,
I said, immediately, without good thought.
I tried to laugh, but was abashed and said,
Think no more of that, my little lady:
a thoughtless comment or a courtier's phrase.

Her voice was gentle but with wondrous depth.

'You have not told me more than I have guessed
these long months past. My mother will not speak
but at your mention stands there motionless.
I am a girl who has not witnessed love
but holds it as a thing much wished on. If
I can play and sing, as tutors say
I do most naturally, it is my mother
softened for a moment, and of one
who had much music in him. This I knew
in watching you bring coloured life and breath
to what are simple sketches, where I see
among the heads, the gestures, hair done up,
a trace of my own mother, as sure as this
as my own features in each draft you make.'

My little donna Anna, go away.
A father asks that you to remember him
as daily he will think of you. That now
is all. He has another family
to whom he owes what is appropriate
and freely given as God's love to us.

She smiled and took my hand.

'Signor Pittore,
you are my father, always will be. I
will ask my mother that you meet sometime
to talk of things elapsed as old friends do,
kindly, without evasion or regret.'

Not an angel would prevail against
Antonia Schiavoni I'd have thought,
but was the same surprised to have the message
to join her company of trusted friends.

Excuse me, dear Antonia, I said, arriving,
I am too early: there is no one here.

'You're not. Be quiet and listen. Caliari.
I am not pleased to hear our daughter Anna
frequents your place of work and talks of meetings
ameliorating what the years have severed
irreparably for me.'

Nor I.

'And so,
Is there more to say?'

No.

'Good day.'

I take my leave of you, Antonia,
and will respect what you have said, but ask
you tell the little lady that her father
still thinks of her and does what's best, and keeps
his quiet council for her constantly.

‘Caliari, I will say as much
to one as willed and headstrong as yourself.’

I left, and there it ended, so I thought,
but at the carnival a few months on
I was accosted by a delicate
and dancing little thing that took my arm.

'We are allowed, you see, if chaperoned,
to dance with strangers, and I will dance
with you, signor Pittore.' How she danced!

'Will I do?' she said, as out of breath
I took her to her place and made my bow.

I smiled. *Indeed, most admirably, my lady*.

'*Lady? My little lady, if you please.*
What then?'

I bid all pretty mistresses
a long farewell. I am too old for this.

'But not to talk to me.'

My little Anna,
I gave a solemn promise to your mother
I would not henceforth blight your life with shadows.

'And I’ve not wholly given up my hopes.'

My turn to smile. But yet at intervals
for three years afterwards there were
odd meetings, common parties, all against
the instincts of the parents, both of them.

'I see at last,' she said, *'a promised land*
beyond this heartache where my parents talk,
confiding as they did, and not through me.'

She spoke so openly, ingenuously,
that what was past took on a lighter step.
I do not think a footpad ruffian, the worst,
but would have let her pass, and smiling too.

I have not mentioned my own wife, our workshop,
Benedetto, daily round. Here all
went well. Continually Elena was
the which poor painters dream of, dutiful
and courteous to workmen and the craft.

But still I thought on donna Anna, much
as moon reflects the sun’s fierce light.

The month
of June swelled day by day to summer heat.
With which there came odd rumours: all who could
moved out to countryside or mainland house.

She must be gone, her mother said. Plans
were now advanced to make her coming out
a thing of note.

'I have a nobleman
whose son will court her. All is ready. The two
will meet.'

Meet, how meet?

'What do you think,
to plight their troths and say love's silly things?
The family is honourable: the two must learn

to dance this quadrille that we call a life.
She'll take the first step as I did, as too
my mother did.'

No, I told her.

'No?'

No, I will not have it. Not for one
who is so beautiful and still so young.

'Not little, Caliari: seventeen
if you would notice as all Venice does.'

I'd rather hang myself than let her go.

'Men are men, Caliari, you know that.
And what they do not win they soon make up.
What has been taught her she will turn to good
and learn by doing how this world is built.'

I went out on the instant, consumed in turn
by sullen anger and a father's care.
I sought her out and walked the length of streets
much talking.

You will go?

'Of course I go.
What can I do? My mother tells me Venice
is broody, waiting, could be dangerous.
The pestilence is with us, lodged within.
For safety and for finishing I have
to go.'

And that is true, my little lady.
I took her hand. She looked at me and smiled.

'But I shall meet there someone I may charm
sufficient that he plight his troth to me.'

He will, assuredly.

'Continually
he'll think of me and walk distracted through
the days still dizzy with my laughter, write
his thoughts in rhymes and little scribbled notes.'

Perhaps.

'He will. I shall demand it, will
not give to him one smile unless he serve
me in a thousand ways.'

Oh, count on that.

'Why do you look at me so oddly, why
the riddling comments and this inquisition?'

My lady, my little Anna, look around.
Today you are a child, a trusting child:
tomorrow mistress of some famous name,
who'll pay his court about where you must yield.

'How dare you say so! I will not. I may
so settle as I please, or mother says,
but I will choose, and when it's right.'

You go
to be a courtesan, perhaps a great one,
as your mother was. I wish you strength
to draw the honey out of poisoned meat.

Tears. I saw no more of her. The sickness
gathered all too quickly. Poorer haunts
saw boards go up, whole sections shut, on wharves
and workshops silence, all the bustle quiet,
and folk now fearful, watching, saying prayers.

Part Seven

We shut the workshop. To the world outside
we were as scarcely living, quiet as mice

The news, though, was of whole streets gone, of wharves
suspended, empty markets, thoroughfares
marked out with crosses and with stench of death.

Our rules said no one came and no one went.
We took provisions from the market towns
that serve our city but now sent by friends.

The days turned weeks and months: the workshop stayed
a hermit's place of silence: in our prayers
we felt God heard us: we were safe.

A knock
one afternoon was met with rough instructions,
which were our rules. Again it came: insistent:
I went to add authority but saw
the little donna Anna. Pitiful
she looked and was admitted, hurriedly.
I took her hand, which trembled as she said.

'Good signor Caliari, give me shelter
a room to lay this weary body down.
Where could it go that had no place but here?
I tried my mother's house but it was locked.
I knocked on palaces of old companions
but no one answered. And there I had to walk
through heaped-up bodies in the streets. I saw
our own true countrymen hauled by on carts

and thence to loading points for God knows where,
by boats and gondolas new-draped in black.

I saw a woman hawking rancid meat
that no one wanted. For pity's sake, she cried,
we have to live! I gave her half a soldo,
no more than that, but in the mud she knelt,
and blessed a woman more unfortunate
than her, who comes most fearfully because
you keep your workshop on, though seeming shut.'

We have commissions that we can't deny
or much delay. Besides, who knows when God
will call his ever-thoughtless children home?

'Thoughtlessness was mine, was solely mine.
I would not heed your ever-kindly words,
but closed my ears and took that sinful path.'

What's done is done, my little lady. We
must look for lodgings in this frightened city.
Here you cannot stay: we have our rules.

We left, the workshop looking at us strangely,
poor brother Benedetto at his brushes,
my wife indignant, with her hands on hip.

And what a way we went! All places closed.
We asked each gondolier we came to: none
would go.

Good friends, for conscience sake:
this is a lady begs you take her safely.

All shook their heads.

'You know, good Veronese,
that no one leaves this city at the plague
time but with written orders from the Doge.'

But how get that? Where could we stay?

They looked
uneasy, spread their hands. We tried afresh
the doors of taverns round us, each was shut.
From high and low we went, and, calling out,
arrived at those dark quarters of the northern
wharves, with stagnant waterways and tiny
streets, the houses leaning, packed together,
where, at the poorest, beside the little church
of San Alvise, a tavern reluctantly,
for ready silver, took us in.

I'll find
you better soon.

'No matter, this will suit me
well enough: the place is clean. But visit
me now daily, and bring news of folk
recovering and friends still safe.'

I will.
And did. Each day I went to one who took
precautions earnestly, and kept her place.

'But none are taken, master painter?'

None,
so far, my little lady, and God's grace
perhaps is looking on us, so we hope.

'Amen to that. My mother's house?'

Still locked.
We have no news.

'No matter. Come and sit
and tell me you will take a simple meal
as with an old-time friend.'

The poorest meal
is made most princely by the company.

She smiled.

'You have not lost the courtier's gift,
my mother spoke of, nor musician's skills,
I hope. So come with viol or pipe next time
that we may hear some merrymaking where
these walls are silent with long-stifled breath.'

And so I did. I played, she sung. And seemed
as those poor linnets shut in wicker pens
who sing their heart out fruitlessly and wait
for freedom fading out from day by day.

One time she curtsied. *'Tell me, is your daughter*
one to gladden a well-practised eye?'

Much, much more than that, I said. To me
she sings as do the angels in high heaven.

'I am like my mother, am I not?'

In grace, in lively comeliness, but even
she whose sturdy presence would invest
the air with senates listening and with grace,
still lacked your innocence and gentle step.

'Then why not wed my mother, as she asked?'

For pride, for her sake and because a painter
is but an artisan who trains his hands
but has no standing in the world that counts.

'You never entertained the thought, refused
to hear her, called yourself unworthy, cast
her off as some contrivance from the past.'

I did in kindness only, and in just accord
to precedence by which our Venice lives.

'For your commissions only, so as not
to wait on courtiers who had used your wife.'

That is not so.

She laughed. *'Of course it is,*
my gran pittore. All Venice knows but does
not judge. Her courtesans are made for pleasure,
displayed in high-wrought, conscious ostentation,
as jewels upon a fabric, as you know
who paint the outward more than inner heart. '

Alone to God is known that inner world,
and what I paint to His most truthful eye
will seem but baubles and poor children's toys.

'Harsh words. And not too cheerful, master painter.
Why should our ends be such, who have so far
survived against the odds?'

We have indeed,
and past the high-dressed fortunes of our friends.

'We need not follow, if we pray to Him
whose path brings ever-chequered light and shade.'

Most true, my little lady. With that hope
so may we look to Him as His great love
pours down in sunlight after scourging rain.

She sang, I played, the two of us. I thought
perhaps the months would see us through till frosts
would purge us of the plague. With that in mind,
with spirits mounting week by week, I came
one morning with a friend, who had his viol
and much good music in his head.

Arrived,
we found the doorway open. I stepped inside
and shouted. No one there. I went in further
until my friend with shaking hand pushed back
the door on which a cross was wet. He called
to me. I took the stairs, tried doors and rooms
and shouted at the street, though nothing came
but silent echoes and the smell of death.

Since when and where? I thought. A voice called down.

'My friend, enough. The occupants have gone.
They came this morning with the burdened cart
along this very passageway. All sped
to cemeteries and far-off smoking pits.'

But she, the little lady, where is she?

'I saw no lady with them, none like that.'

Impossible. I saw her recently
and nothing in her laughter spoke of death.

'Then she has fled, my friend, as you must too.

But where?

'To San Erasmo's monasteries,
for many go there when the sickness falls.'

I stared. The window closed. The silence dropped
a fearful stillness in my ears. I went
the whole way running to Rialto steps.

Resolved to go immediately I thought
of my own family and artisans.
I needed rooms made up, where she and I
could live apart, secluded, but my wife
there folded her large arms and said.

'No.
For God's sake, Paolo, would you harm your wife
and offspring, all about you for a whim,
a promise made so long ago?

Suppose
you die, what then of us? Poor Benedetto
is not too capable, and honest men
for work depend on us. You shall not go.'

I went, but as a thief does in the night,
looking backward always, shunning folk
who walk in daylight consciences. I found
at last a gondola, black-draped, and sat.

'Take care, my gran pittore,' said the guide,
'for few come back from those far walls. But for

the coin you pay and pressing words I take
you as a sinner when the soul is lost.'

Evening when we got there: in the smoke
of oily torches and of burning cloth
were nests of writhing bodies, hideously
distended though alive, and each one thick
with vomit, face encrusted, calling still,
between convulsions, on our Saviour's name.

Among them, quiet as flies that suck at meat,
there moved the convent sisters, tribes of them,
the which I vainly tried to stop and ask.
'Pray God your friend is elsewhere. Go from here!'

I searched along the heaped-up bodies laid
disorderly through rooms, beneath the walls,
in garden plots and orchards, everywhere
the same: some silent, sleeping peacefully,
some groaning in their agony. A nun
then grasped my sleeve, and said,

'This place is deadly.
Believe the one you seek is somewhere else.
My friend, go home. Burn clothes. Good brother, go.'

Where are those fearful pits, I asked, where all
the stretcher parties went with faces muffled?

How pitying she led me, where I saw
the piles of thousands dead, thick-sown with lime.

At last I turned away and bowed my head,
returned a chastened man who maybe saw
some mark of justice in the wrath of God.

In time the sickness lessened, though the storm
still poured its heavy drops as one by one
we heard of others when the church bells pealed.
A long, long interval of mourning followed.

I heard the Schiavoni had returned,
and sent a notice on. She did not come
to one would have given up all wealth
to have our Anna safe.

It's true in time
I found new clients. As before, I painted
riots of carnivals, but now the colours
had not that confidence of heaven's light.
Perhaps more awkwardly, more prone to doubts
I tried all manner with the Schiavoni,
but saw in festivals how sad she looked,
this first of courtesans so plainly dressed.

All sorrows pass in time. Our children married.
I grew more prosperous as gifts declined.
But courtier's elegance and women's grace
still hummed as flies do over pitted meat.

Part Eight

I hear the steps and turn. A nun with pock-
marked face, a stooping body, and with eyes
I still remember, stares at me.

'So now
you look away, my gran pittore,
although I kept you foremost in my prayers?'

I could not speak, but in my tears I felt
her light touch on my sleeve, and then my hand.
I found her smiling as composure righted
and looking at me with an anxious kindness.

'Have years been good to you, my gran pittore,
filled out your purposes as you once said?'

Prosperous, my little lady, blest
with wealth and standing. My sons are well, and one
inherits something of my workman's gifts.
For that much thanks. The rest I do not know.
The promise of a high spring morning, the birds
that lighten with their singing, wind with fragrance —
these I have not felt from that sad morning
of finding that far lodging house was bare.

Where did you go, my little lady, why,
by all the saints, not leave or send a message?

'Pride and misery. I was afflicted,
with worse than pestilence, whose pain is short,
that left these pockmarks and this wasted frame.

For months I wondered why His grace should test
so small a helpless creature, tell my mother
that all she cherished in her heart was spent:
no more to walk in sunshine where the wind
still whispered to me as my suitors should.

At length, not speedily, with long relapses,
I came to care for others, and with God's grace
became as they are now and gained my peace.'

Here, in this poor world of waste and shadow,
withdrawn to penitence and candle ends?

'I sew and sing, and former learning serves
to help my sisters in their daily steps
along that testing journey all must take
to where in majesty our Lord awaits.

But there are duties, surely? Your poor mother
was entitled to have word of you.

'She had that news and duly helped me, seeing
I was lodged and in the care of nuns.

'In truth, whatever you had kept me from:
licentiousness and pride in my high bearing,
the boast of men and bestial tastes, that truth
at last she recognized was also God's,
and in my suffering had made His sign.'

But He, my little lady, does not ask
we close the hand that feeds us, turn away
from those high promises to Noah made.

'Belief is one thing, faith another. Think,
my gran pittore how those steps in thought
are but an issue from that well of faith.

You have walked, my father, far beyond
what earthly promises provided for,
have mixed with Doge and princes, laughed and shut
the ear as I did to a larger truth.

Besides, if were truly gone, why then
no search or message for me, prayers or candles?
The capital you spent, which is our Lord's,
was turned to other uses: you in friends
and high prosperity confused the way.'

So is the father is humbled by the child,
and all he said in courtly remonstrance
has come to hurt him, and make sport of truth
that lives in actions only, not our words.

'Both words and actions make our path to God,
though it is hard for us, as for my mother.
Along her way of service and reflection
she takes her last and backward-tracing steps.
Be with her, gran pittore, take her hand
and with your smiling courtesy redeem
this long, hard promontory we call the earth.'

I will, my lady, that those days of joy
be long remembered when you were conceived.

'My gran pittore, it is time to leave.
I will take you to the entrance of that farther
world I have renounced, and send you on.
Your soul hangs on this instant, as in turn

my mother's and my own. From here you must
in faith precede me to that other place,
and I will pray for all those steps you take.'

Part Nine

I went, an old man tottering through the gardens
of flowering marjoram and empty vine.
Before me rose the blazing river, a fire
of stillness and of shining white, in which
God's hidden purposes were mixed with mine.

How different now my bustling city seemed.
Each hour of travelling put a further year
upon my recollections and the tears.

I thought of shadows in the stone at noon,
that walk beneath our steps while we have breath
above the poles of wood that lift this firmament
to shout and spectacle.

How dark the water
seems as sun flares out and falls on past
the wharves and palaces, how cold the wind
now off the far lagoon that crimps the surface.
We come to land. The boatman helps me out.
I take the streets to San Sebastiano
walls I decorated long ago.

How hard the stone is here, how shadowy
from noon, as I have often noted, walking
in my red silk slippers, one with pageantries
of painted fabric on these walls. Outside
the sky is thin and ever changing; our faith
shuts doors against the day. Such is the truth
of martyrs, is impregnable — as donna
Anna told me, and I now have sense

to kneel and light a candle, feel a weighted
absence test the heart of things I knew.

Carletto bears my name, and Gabriele,
the first most gifted, and will take my place
within that fragile world of great appearing.
To both descendants I bequeath a land
companionable and ripening, fields criss-crossed
with willows and with poplar, fields that look
beyond the littorals that braid our lives
with silver osiers trembling in the wind.
The things we build, high towers and colonnades
and cupolas, great domes of learning: these
as shouts of citizens we take to God
in dreams and conjurations. So it was
and doubtless ever will be. In these walls
of flare and spectacle I bow my head.